



February 15, 2023
Rebecca Simonsen, Vice President
District 1199 New England
Before the Appropriations Committee

Good Evening Senator Osten, Senator Slap, Representative Walker, Representative Haddad and members of the Committee. My name is Rebecca Simonsen and I am a Vice President with District 1199 New England. Our union represents 26,000 health care workers across the public and private sectors in Connecticut, including approx 6,500 health care workers at state agencies like the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, the Department of Developmental Services, the Department of Corrections, the Department of Children and Families, and others. I'm here today because there is a staffing crisis in state healthcare services that is so severe it is causing our most vulnerable to be turned away from life-saving services. As of December 1, there are over 350 vacancies in nurse positions across DMHAS, DDS, DOC, and DCF – a 31% vacancy rate. DMHAS has a 42% vacancy rate and nearly 1 out of 3 healthcare positions for services provided by District 1199 union members remain vacant. When the state is unable to hire nurses, they are not able to keep units open. This means that the capacity of our public sector safety net services - which are here to serve residents who need the care the most - is significantly reduced.

I am here tonight to testify in support of funding District 1199's "Grow Our Own" Proposals to develop a public sector nursing pipeline as a part of a comprehensive strategy to address this staffing crisis. District 1199 has been in dialogue with the Higher Education Committee about these proposals - which I will elaborate on more - but I am here tonight because we know that this will cost money and we are asking that you allocate the money needed to support these programs.

State agencies have been unsuccessful in recruiting the volume of nurses and other healthcare staff required to address the crisis and so District 1199 has created what we are calling our "Grow Our Own" proposals as an important component of a comprehensive recruitment and retention effort in order to stabilize state services. Our "Grow Our Own" proposals include: (1) Expanding the capacity within the CSCU Nursing programs; (2) Reserving slots at CSCU nursing programs for state employees to create a pipeline to public sector jobs; (3) Offering loan forgiveness to staff working in the public sector; (4) Creating preceptor programs; (5) Establish graduate nurse programs so nurses can be hired as they finish school before they complete their licensure exam; (6) Utilize the existing workforce to help teach classes - by creating a visiting professor program between our CSCU programs and nurses with advanced degrees already working in the public sector and; (7) Create a working group that includes representatives from 1199 that will evaluate nursing curriculum and establish 5 year and 10 year recruitment and retention goals for the State.

Here is one example of what is at stake if the staffing crisis goes unaddressed. DMHAS' Addiction Services Division is the only setting in the state, public or private, offering the highest level of medically managed inpatient treatment to recover from substance abuse. It is operating at less than 50% capacity due to over 50 nurse vacancies (350 overall) at Connecticut Valley Hospital, even as overdose deaths have increased by at least 25% from 2019 to 2021. Blue Hills Hospital is turning away more than 20 people a day in Hartford. The patients who are denied care are majority Black and Latino individuals.

Connecticut can fund this. We have billions of dollars in state coffers. We are one of the wealthiest states in the country. We HAVE the resources to fund these programs. And the vast majority of us believe EVERYONE, not just the lucky few or the wealthy few, should have access to the services they need to save their lives. Thank you for your time.